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What has happened in South Africa since 1990 is a story to gladden the heart. At the tip of a “Dark” continent ravaged by violence and corruption, in a country which had become the universal symbol of that most despised form of racism, Apartheid, a transition to non-racial multi-party democracy has taken place peacefully. In the face of the direst predictions of gloom, a country torn by institutionalised violence for the best part of this century has managed to embark on the most extraordinary exercise in reconciliation. That such transition should largely be the work of one of the greatest statesmen of modern times makes that story even more edifying. Nelson Mandela, the black saviour of the most truly racially mixed country on the African continent, tames the beast of racial hatred and extends the hand of friendship to the white enemies of the dream of national harmony which he kept alive during his 27 years of confinement.

And, indeed, it is an extraordinary story—by any standards and whatever the perspective from which it is analysed. Wonderment and thankfulness should rightly be the first reaction of all those, by now legions, who take an interest in the fate of South Africa. There will be time later for the cold light of day, for the jaundiced views to emerge, for those who resent stories of success and loathe heroes to proclaim the difficulties of the post-Apartheid transition—to argue, as they undoubtedly will that it was simply too good to be true, that it could never work, that after Mandela... that “I told you so”. For now, let us truly rejoice in the good news, not just because it is so rare in a world where national and regional conflicts are devastating entire communities in Africa and elsewhere but because South Africa undoubtedly faces a very difficult future, one with perhaps more pitfalls than promise. Yes, of course, it is unlikely that the hopes of a post-Apartheid utopia will be fulfilled. Reconciliation has its limits; violence and inequality are bound to deface the dream of an harmonious and prosperous South Africa. But that is in the future. Let us for now savour the achievements of the past few years, let us understand the significance of the present.

The outline of South Africa’s recent history is well known and can easily be rehearsed. Faced with the failure of its policy of regional destabilisation and internal repression, the National Party government found in F.W. de Klerk the leader with the vision and the courage to initiate the transition to post-Apartheid politics. Although Nelson Mandela was only released in 1990, the foundations on which the negotiations for such transition would take place

had already been put in place. By the time, in February 1990, de Klerk legalised all opposition movements and announced the rules for the discussions ahead, much of the groundwork had been done. The African National Congress (ANC) and the National Party (NP) had agreed on all party-negotiations leading to the framing of a new constitution and universal one-man one-vote elections. What remained to be achieved—and the devil was in the detail—was to integrate all political movements within the negotiations and find a satisfactory compromise as to the pace and modalities of the transition.

The outcome of these negotiations was, as might have been expected, a compromise between the wishes of the two main parties, the ANC and NP, and the demands of the smaller parties (chiefly those representing the interests of the white minority and the Zulus supporting Buthelezi’s Inkatha Freedom Party or IFP). That these negotiations resulted in the holding of national elections on the date announced (26-29 April 1994) is itself nothing short of a triumph of political will—for there were many (admittedly minorities, both white and black) who did their utmost to trigger the violence which would destroy the political transition and usher in civil war. Above and beyond the vision and skills of the two main protagonists (Mandela and de Klerk), it can be safely assumed that success was largely due to the understanding on all side of the apocalyptic consequences of failure. Even Buthelezi, that most implacable opponent of the compromise brokered by the ANC and the NP, blinked when faced with the abyss of his discontent, and agreed (long past the eleventh hour) for the IFP to participate in the elections.

The results of the elections were much as expected, with the ANC gaining 252 seats, the NP 81 and the IFP 43 seats in a 400-seat National Assembly. The elections thus allowed the representation of all parties with more than 5 per cent of the votes in Parliament and led to the formation of a government of national unity to oversee the drafting of the new Constitution. Nelson Mandela was elected President and de Klerk as well as the ANC’s Thabo Mbeki were chosen as Vice-Presidents. Since then, the government has worked tirelessly both to implement the ambitious but necessary plans for reconstruction and development and to guarantee the constitutional transition which will lead to the 1999 elections, the final stage in the move to a new non-racial and democratic South Africa.

How is it possible for such momentous changes to have taken place so rapidly, and why? What were the highlights of this transition and how was it perceived by those who were responsible for it? What are the costs of this peaceful “revolution”? What, finally, did it feel like to be involved, as participants or witnesses, in the changes brought about by such a stupendous event in history? These questions, and many others, are those which this extensive issue of Les Temps modernes addresses.

The ambition of this volume, so far as I can judge, is both to provide solid information on the historical process of political transition and to give the reader a feel for the more subjective and perhaps more subterranean aspects of what will inevitably rank as one of the great historical “moments” of the twentieth-century. To this end, it offers a mixture of personal testimonies, literary accounts, memoirs, interviews, historical summaries and (political or economic) analysis. The mixture is judicious, even if the enterprise is vast. Such a volume could never be more than a pot pourri but the important
question is how (subjectively and objectively) enlightening is it as a document on “history in the making”. How much do we learn about South Africa today?

The book is in four parts: “L’élection”, “Le poids du passé”, “La transition: la politique sans haine”, “Les défis de l’avenir”, “Mémoires communes”—thirty nine articles in all! Within each section, there is a creative blend of genres: from memoirs and interviews to academic articles. Such an varied approach is to be applauded; to inform is ideally to be done in many different ways, through many separate voices. The format is ideally suited to an attempt at grasping the contemporary realities of a country as complex as South Africa. This approach, however, also has its limits and these limits can at times be detrimental to comprehension. Admirable as this volume is in intention, it is possessed of some serious weaknesses.

In the first place, the five sections are far from being equal in their ability to enlighten the reader on the object they seek to apprehend. Nor do they always provide the basic information which the reader should be entitled to receive in a volume of such length. It is, of course, the fate of multi-authored volume to lack overall coherence but, because of this structural difficulty, it is imperative that such one-country volumes benefit from a firm editorial hand—that is, one which ensures that the mix of articles provided is sufficiently comprehensive and sufficiently complementary. This is, regrettably, not always the case here.

In the section on the elections, for example, there is no single article which gives a simple and complete summary of the electoral process and, most importantly, a table of all the results. Even less do we find an analysis of the specificities of these elections and of their consequences, both for political representation and for the political transition to take place between 1994 and 1999. Some of the more useful analyses of the elections are instead to be found in the third section on the transition proper in papers which do not specifically address the question of elections.

The second section is, if anything, even more deficient. While there is no doubting the human interest conveyed by Albie Sachs, the piece on Robben Island, the memoirs of P. W. Botha and the topicality of the article on rugby, there is a drastic dearth of serious history. It is true that this volume is an attempt to convey contemporary history “à chaud” rather than duplicate the many good accounts available (mostly in English, of course) on the historical development of the country. Nevertheless, “Le poids du passé” fails almost completely to give even an elementary account of the weight of the past on the present. It is without a doubt here that the volume is most disappointing—all the more so since South African historiography is so rich. There would have been any number of solid historians of South Africa who could have provided chapters on those aspects of the country’s history which most matter for a proper understanding of the present.

On the other hand, the third section (“La transition: la politique sans haine”) is strong, both on information and analysis. The key questions concerning the political transition between 1990 and 1994 were three: 1) what were the internal politics of the main protagonists—chief of which the ANC and the NP? 2) what drove the negotiations to success? and 3) how were the fissiparous political forces deterred from triggering terminal political violence? The simple summary answer is that there never was any realistic alternative
to successful negotiations; that the ANC and NP shared a vital interest in securing agreement and that a breakdown would necessarily be detrimental to both; that a failure to manage the political transition would result in uncontrollable violence, the outcome of which was likely to be the civil disintegration of the country; and, finally, that those forces opposed to an ANC/NP led agreement were too marginal and too divided to have any realistic chance of engineering the breakdown of order which would have favoured their designs.

"La transition: la politique sans haine" succeeds well in explaining the process and momentum which carried the negotiations towards a successful conclusion—even in the face of such provocation as the assassination of the ANC's Chris Hani. One should highlight here articles by Dominique Darbon, Hermann Giliomee and Tom Lodge, for providing the right mix of fact and interpretation. Careful attention to these articles, and some of the others too, will enable the reader to begin to make sense of the complex series of processes at work during this crucial period. Of particular note will be the political dynamics of the two main parties, the ANC and the NP, both of which succeeded in tapping the full potential of their "natural" constituencies but failed to make much progress beyond. The ANC was certainly disappointed in losing to the NP in the race for the "Coloured" vote in the Western Cape and to the IFP in Kwazulu Natal (where it claimed irregularities)—even if it carried every other province. For its part, the NP had hopes of receiving more black votes than in the end it did receive. And it is precisely this close fit between political party and "natural" constituency which remains one of the main obstacles to the full development of democratic politics in South Africa. It undoubtedly will be the main challenge for politicians at the next elections.

The fourth section ("Les défis de l'avenir") is also useful. It includes a solid chapter on the economy by André Ulpat-Dublet, a revealing article on black workers' motivation by Robert Posniak and an insightful paper by Jean-Pascal Daloz on South Africa's place in Africa. These are obviously some of the key issues of the years to come. Certainly, the extent to which economic growth will be able to finance the Reconstruction and Development Programme is the single most important factor in the long term future of democracy in South Africa. The country's potential is high but the obstacles to the twin aims of development and equity are formidable. At the very least, there will for the foreseeable future be an enormous tension between popular expectations and economic achievement.

In a section on the challenges of the future one would, however, have expected some discussion of the social and racial difficulties faced by the country. Remarkable as the transition has been so far, it would be naive to think that the legacy of Apartheid can be overcome in less than a generation, if that rapidly. In the meantime, the social aspects of the transition are bound to reveal the extent of social divisions and internal violence suppressed for so long. It is obviously not a coincidence if today in South Africa the issue at the top of everyone’s agenda is the breakdown of law and order—symbolised as it is by violent crime such as car hijackings. On a different register but equally important is the question of housing: how will the government (whatever its complexion) be able to meet the aspirations of those who were shunted into the worst type of shanty-towns and how will it resist the wave of squatters
now already washing onto city centres and affluent suburbs. Finally, it is a little disappointing that there should have been no discussion of race. Although it is now not politically correct to mention this issue, it is alive and kicking—as was well demonstrated by the crisis in 1995 at Witwatersrand University when the newly appointed pro-Vice Chancellor, Professor Magkobe, was accused by thirteen high ranking colleagues of incompetence.

To some extent, the issue of race appears in the last section (“Mémoires communes”) where the two sections on literature (by Denise Coussy & E. Sinaert) and the one on San art (by J.D Lewis-Williams) are to be welcome. So is the fascinating article by Denis-Constant Martin on Coloured culture and music. Here, finally, we get a sense of the complexity of the social and racial make-up of this extraordinary nation. Yes, South Africa is indeed a country with a potential to reveal the many splendours of its multi-racial and multi-cultural heritage.

This volume is warmly to be applauded both for the contribution it will make in France to understanding the new South Africa and for the open mindedness with which it went about its admirable task of synthesising so much information. There is today enormous interest in this newly liberated country and *Les Temps modernes* is to be congratulated for having put together such an informative and enlightening dossier.

Patrick CHABAL.


L‘ouvrage présenté ici s‘ordonne autour de trois thèmes respectivement intitulés : guerres de décolonisation comparées, regards croisés sur les décolonisations, aspects économiques, religieux et culturels.

Dans le premier thème, la part de l‘Afrique noire est fort réduite essentiellement consacrée aux guerres de décolonisation d‘Indonésie, d‘Indochine, d‘Algérie et de Chypre. P. Chabal analyse cependant la notion de guerres révolutionnaires à travers le cas des guerres de décolonisation en

1. Dont il est rendu compte dans ce même numéro.